



CATAWBA COUNTY

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Public Health

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Cervical Cancer: Your Best Protection is Early Detection

Ashley was a typical junior in college with a full schedule between her classes and campus involvement. She started to notice some slight pelvic discomfort but thought nothing of the matter and continued on with her everyday life. When she went for her routine physical exam, Ashley decided to mention the problem to her doctor. Her doctor performed a Pap test to check for cervical cell abnormalities to ensure that nothing was wrong. A few days later her doctor called with the test results. Ashley had the early stages of cervical cancer.

In shock that she had cancer in her early 20's, the positive news was that her prognosis was good since the cancer was detected so early. Fortunately, she would not require extensive treatments like chemotherapy or radiation. The doctor performed a procedure to remove the cancer and abnormal cells and she immediately returned to her college routine. Understanding firsthand the importance of early detection, Ashley uses her experience to encourage friends to seek medical treatment early and get routine physical exams.

Last year an estimated 399 women in North Carolina were diagnosed with cervical cancer, and 124 died from the disease. To help bring attention to the importance of early detection, January has been designated as National Cervical Health Awareness month. Throughout the month, Women's Preventative Health and the North Carolina Breast and Cervical Cancer Control Program (BCCCP) at Catawba County Public Health is focused on increasing awareness of the importance of screening for and preventing cervical cancer.

Cervical cancer is typically preventable and slow growing, often occurring without any symptoms. Due to the silent nature of the disease, early detection is vital.

"There are three great ways to prevent and detect cervical cancer that we strongly encourage for women to do: schedule a Pap test and routine physical to check for cervical cancer and participate in the HPV vaccination series," said Sarah Lawson, Clinical Health Nursing Supervisor at Catawba County Public Health. "Catawba County Public Health offers free or low-cost cervical cancer screenings and follow-up services to eligible women ages 18-64 through the BCCCP and Women's Preventative Health programs. We also offer HPV vaccination known as Gardasil for women who meet the eligibility requirements."

Strains of the human papilloma virus, or HPV, can lead to cervical cancer. The Gardasil vaccine series can be given to females ages 11-26 and helps to prevent four types of HPV that are known to cause cervical cancer. The vaccine does not replace Pap tests and routine physicals but serves as an additional precautionary measure in preventing cervical cancer.

A Pap test is a quick and simple test that offers the best opportunity to detect cervical cancer at an early stage by identifying abnormal cell changes the cervix that could potentially develop into cancer. Pap testing should begin at age 21 or within 3 years after onset of sexual activity. It should be repeated at least every 3 years unless ordered more frequently by a physician.

Along with a Pap test, routine physicals help in finding any abnormalities. They help to evaluate a woman's body and life as it is constantly changing.

Women are encouraged to call their local health care provider to schedule annual screenings exams. To find out if you are eligible for a free or low-cost Pap test at Catawba County Public Health please call 828-695-5800.

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